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XANANA GUSMÃO

Profile

José Alexandre Gusmão, alias Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, was born on June 20, 1946 in Manatuto, East Timor. He was raised in the country, with a brother and five sisters. His father was a school teacher. He completed primary and started secondary school at the Catholic mission of "Nossa Senhora de Fatima" in Dare, then went on to Dili. He started to work very early in life, mornings as a chartered surveyor and afternoons teaching at the Chinese school. In April 1974 he joined the staff of "A Voz de Timor" (the Voice of Timor).

He adhered to the FRETILIN - Revolutionary Front for an Independence East Timor - that same year and later became Deputy Head of its Department of Information.

On December 7, 1975, Indonesia invaded East Timor. After Nicolau Lobato's death in December 1978, and the decimation of the FRETILIN leadership Xanana found himself in charge of the reorganisation of the Resistance. In March 1981, he set out to organise the first National Conference of the FRETILIN, during which he was elected leader of the Resistance and Commander-in-Chief of the FALINTIL (National Liberation Armed Forces of East Timor), a responsibility which he had taken on in practice ever since Lobato's death.

Under his command, in 1983, the FRETILIN initiated the first preliminary talks with the occupying armed forces in the liberated areas of the territory.

He conceived and implemented the Policy of National Unity which translated into increasing contacts with the Catholic Church and the development of a clandestine network in urban areas and other occupied zones. In 1988, the success of the initiative for National Unity enabled Xanana to create the CNRM - National Council of Maubere Resistance.

A year after the Santa Cruz massacre, Xanana was captured on November 20, 1992 by the Indonesian armed forces and imprisoned in Jakarta.

According to an Amnesty International Report (East Timor, Xanana Gusmão – A Briefing; ASA 21/58/97, August 1997), "after his capture [...] Xanana Gusmão was held in secret military custody for 17 days before representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were permitted to see him. During this period he was believed to have been subjected to psychological ill-treatment in the form of sleep deprivation in an apparent attempt to prevent him from concentrating fully on his defence plea. [...] A defence lawyer was appointed [...] just six days before the trial began". At the conclusion of a trial denounced as farcical by all international observers, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. This sentence was later commuted to 20 years.

It is under these circumstances that Xanana revealed himself as a man of exception. Apparently giving in to the Indonesian pressure, he managed to revert the course of events in court, denouncing the genocidal character of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor in front of the international press.

In prison, Xanana has been devoting his time to the elaboration of the strategies of the Resistance, while studying English, Bahasa Indonesia (the Indonesian language) and Law. He also paints and writes poetry, cultivating a talent already recognised in 1975, when he won the Timor Poetry Prize with his poem *Mauberiadas.* Some of his paintings have been sold, the payment of which were donated to the Resistance at Xanana's request. In 1994, some of his political essays were published in a book, *Timor-Leste - um Povo, uma Pátria*, (East Timor - a People, a Nation) Ed. Colibri, Lisbon.

To the people of East Timor, Xanana has come to represent the symbol of their struggle for freedom, the key-person in the political, peaceful and negotiated solution-seeking process for the two decade long conflict.

His dedication has earned him the recognition of the international media as the "Mandela of Timor". Transcending the borders of tiny East Timor, today, he is an inspiration to the growing pro-democracy movement and the people in Indonesia itself. In his acceptance speech Nobel Peace Prize co-Laureate José Ramos-Horta stated: "This speech belongs to someone else who should be here today. He is na outstanding man of courage, tolerance and statesmanship. Yet, this man is in prison for no other crime than his ideas and vision of peace and freedom. [...] Through Xanana, I bow to my people in profound respect, loyalty and humility because they are the real heroes and peace-makers."

This recognition has now been extended to political leaders world-wide. Before Suharto's stepping down, Ambassador Jamsheed Marker, UN Secretary-General's Personal Representative for the East Timor question visited Xanana three times in prison.

President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, made an unprecedented request to meet with Xanana during a State visit to Indonesia in July 1997. After an initial decline of the request, President Mandela was granted the visit and discussed the East Timor issue for two hours with Xanana. In April 1998, President Mandela sent his Foreign Minister, Alfred Nzo, to follow up on the matter. Mr. Nzo met alone with Xanana for half an hour as the Indonesian military monitored the meeting.

In April 1998, at the East Timorese National Convention in the Diaspora, which established the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT), Xanana Gusmão was reaffirmed by acclamation as leader of the East Timorese Resistance and President of CNRT.

Since Suharto's resignation, on 21 May 1998, the number of Heads of state and government officials who have joined the campaign for the release of Xanana Gusmão has grown immensely. The international community has come to understand that he is the key to the resolution of the East Timor conflict, as President Mandela had stated after meeting him. His release will unlock the negotiation process as it also means the full participation of the East Timorese representatives in the UN-sponsored negotiating process.

On 26 May 1998, two prominent Indonesian pro-democracy leaders, Muchtar Pakpahan (leader of the SBSI*) and Sri Bintang Pamungkas (leader of PUDI**) were released from Cipinang Prison and expressed to the international media their full support and solidarity to Xanana Gusmão. Muchtar Pakpahan later declared to the Portuguese National Radio (RDP-Antena 1) that his trade union would engage in a campaign for Xanana's release.

Once free, Xanana Gusmão will be a steadfast spokesperson for Peace, Justice and Freedom.

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Notes:

*** SBSI – The Indonesian Prosperity Trade Union, largest trade union of Indonesia, legalised on 26 May 1998.**

**** PUDI – Indonesian opposition political party.**

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